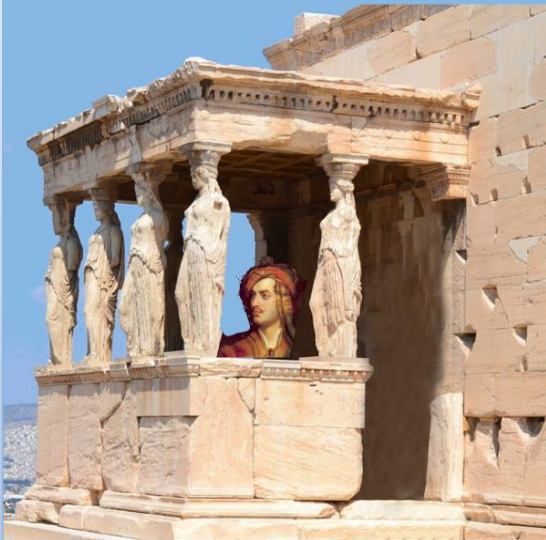


Thirty-Seven Guns

Tricia Price



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PART ONE THE LAURELS

The Secretary's welcome was effusive, delighted and never-ending. Mr John Cam Hobhouse, forced into unwilling admiration of his fluency, wished fervently that his friend would come and assist him – surely the fellow wasn't such a dandy that his toilet must occupy him this age. The third person in the room, a priest, was mercifully silent – speaking neither French nor English, he must content himself perforce with bowing and beaming whenever the Englishman looked his way.

The Secretary was still speaking. "But it is a matter for the utmost congratulation! To have crossed the perilous seas from your northern island – what bravery! And to have penetrated safely to His Highness's capital despite the brigands – I do trust and hope you were not molested?"

"We met one or two tough characters but no footpads, I assure you. And yesterday a gun was fired close at hand, but that I believe was the work of a shepherd only."

"Tck-tck! They are unlettered oafs, our native shepherds" – Hobhouse smiled involuntarily at the "our" – "and know no better. But you will find no such discourtesy here at Iannina. You may be assured of my personal attention to your slightest desire."

Hobhouse bowed his gratitude – the priest bowed back.

The spate of words flowed on. "Iannina is, of course, most happy – and most honoured – to be your host. His Highness is desolated that he is not at present here to entertain you in person. He has been obliged to leave on an affair of some small moment – *une petite guerre*, you understand, which absorbs his attention. Ibrahim Pasha is proving a little – difficult. Always is it thus!" The Secretary sighed.

Hobhouse was courteously sympathetic. (Heavens, how much